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## Interparental conflict and child adjustment: main concepts and research findings

### Streszczenie

W artykule zaprezentowano przegląd literatury na temat podstawowych modeli teoretycznych oraz wyników badań dotyczących wyjaśniania związków pomiędzy konfliktem małżeńskim a reakcjami dzieci. Głównym celem było zrozumienie mechanizmów łączących konflikty małżeńskie z problemami przystosowania dzieci. Przedstawiono dwa główne modele teoretyczne, tj. *Cognitive-Contextual Framework* (Grych i Fincham, 1990) oraz *Emotional Security Hypothesis* (Davies i Cummings, 1994). Analiza wyników badań empirycznych wskazuje, że konflikty małżeńskie wiążą się z licznymi problemami w przystosowaniu dzieci. Destruktywne konflikty rodzicielskie wiążą się z problemami w zachowaniu, podczas gdy pozytywna emocjonalność i konstruktywne sposoby rozwiązywania konfliktów powodują reakcje neutralne lub pozytywne u dzieci. Zaprezentowano również podstawowe wyniki badań nad skutecznością psychoedukacyjnych programów dla rodziców mających na celu prewencję negatywnych skutków konfliktów małżeńskich.

### Słowa kluczowe

konflikt rodzicielski, przystosowanie dziecka, programy edukacyjne dla rodziców

### Abstract

This is a review study of theoretical frameworks and research findings concerning the relationship between marital conflict and children's response. The main focus is on understanding the mechanisms connecting marital conflict to child adjustment. Two main theoretical models are discussed, namely, Cognitive-Contextual Framework by Grych and Fincham (1990) and Emotional Security Hypothesis by Davies and Cummings (1994). The analysis shows that marital conflicts are associated with a wide range of children's adjustment problems. Parental destructive conflict patterns are associated with children's behavioral problems, whereas positive emotionality and constructive conflict resolution lead to children's positive or even neutral reactions to marital problems. Results are presented on how useful psychoeducational programs are for parents that prevent negative marital conflict effects on children.

### Keywords

interparental conflict, child's adjustment, educational programs for parents

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## Introduction

In marital and family life interparental conflicts occur naturally, but intense, frequent and not well-managed marital disputes or, what is worse, unresolved marital conflicts are often very stressful for children. Children's adjustment problems as consequences of interparental conflicts may be manifested as: internalizing symptoms (e.g. anxiety, depression, withdrawal, low self-esteem, somatic complaints – Masten et al., 2005; Ackok & Demo, 1999), externalizing problems (e.g. aggression, delinquency, bullies other children, hyperactivity, delinquency, substance abuse – Masten et al., 2005; Ackok & Demo, 1999), insufficient social competences, and difficulties in academic achievements (Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2004). The links between parental marital conflicts and children's behavioral problems or adjustment difficulties were the subject of extensive research during the last 20 years (e.g. Cummings & Davies, 1994; Fosco & Grych, 2007; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald, 2000; Ablow, Measelle, Cowan & Cowan, 2009). From the children's perspective it is essential to know (a) which parental fights are risky for children and which are not, (b) which elements of conflict are the most damaging, and (c) is parental fighting more disturbing for boys or for girls? (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

The answers to these questions were motivated by the supposition that children might be influenced by different aspects of marital conflicts, e.g. frequency, anger expression, intensity, escalation, thematic content and ways of resolution. Initially, simple correlational studies on parental conflicts and their effects on children were performed on clinic samples, followed by analyses of variables that could properly characterize these relationships, namely, by playing a mediator or moderator role in relationships between interparental conflict and children's adjustment.

Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey and Cummings (2006) distinguished two generations of research on interparental conflicts versus children's adjustment problems. In the first generation, the relations between interparental discord and children's adjustment problems have been established (cf. Cummings & Davies, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). In the second research generation the mechanisms or processes have been identified, which explain the effects on children who are exposed to interparental discord (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald, 2000; Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2004; Gerard, Buehler, Franck & Anderson, 2005). Also, an understanding of how and why interparental conflict is associated with child vulnerability to psychological problems has been gained (Fincham, 1994; Sturge-Apple, Cummings & Davies, 2006).

The primary objective of my study is to provide a current research overview on the influence that interparental conflicts have on children's reactions. The second objective is to present a concise discussion on the conceptual framework underlying a number

of research projects. The third objective is to put forward some basic assumptions for parents' education programs to prevent negative marital conflicts along with an effectiveness assessment concerning such programs.

This paper is intended as a selective review of research findings. Consequently, the studies reviewed illustrate rather than summarize the relevant research results and point out some practical implications for educators.

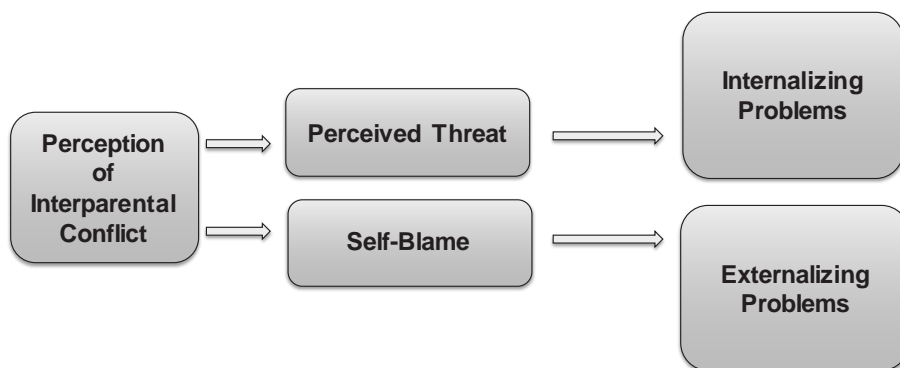
## **Theoretical framework**

In the literature two main theoretical frameworks aimed at explaining the mechanism relating marital conflict to child adjustment are often recalled, that is, the Cognitive-Contextual Framework of Grych and Fincham (1990) and the Emotional Security Hypothesis of Davies and Cummings (1994). These models seek to understand how interparental conflict effects children's psychological and social functioning. Theoretical assumptions in the Cognitive-Contextual Framework and the Emotional Security Hypothesis are based on different paradigms.

**The Cognitive-Contextual Framework.** In this model the key role in explaining the relationship between interparental conflicts and child maladjustment is assigned to the child's interparental conflict appraisals (Grych & Fincham, 1990). It is assumed that children subjectively evaluate the parental interaction and capture the cause of interparental conflict, its development and consequences. Even though appraisals are typically considered purely cognitive, they may also contain some affective elements (Fosco & Grych, 2007). Interparental conflicts are noticed by children in everyday interactions and perceived by them in terms of threat and self-blame. Childrens' perceptive appraisal of conflicts between parents affects their behavioral and emotional reactions to these conflicts (e.g. Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald, 2000; Fosco & Grych, 2007).

Marital conflict's negative effects on children are observable both, as mentioned above, as internalizing problems like anxiety, depression, withdrawal, and low self-esteem; and externalizing problems like aggression, hyperactivity, delinquency, and substance abuse (cf. Acock & Demo, 1999). All these problems can be seen as a child's difficulties in psychological adjustment. The role of child's self-blame and perceived threat as being mediators of the relation between child's interparental conflict perception and the maladjustment is graphically depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** *Children's appraisals of interparental conflict and their functioning problems (based on Grych et al., 2000, p. 1649; Gerard et al., 2005, p. 379)*



The children's appraisal of interparental conflicts is also affected by the wider context in which conflicts occur. Four factors were identified by Grych and Fincham (1990) that can influence the way children perceive and respond to conflicts between parents, namely (1) gender differences, (2) temperament, (3) family characteristics, and (4) the family's emotional climate (Fosco & Grych, 2007). As for gender differences (factor 1) some studies indicated that girls are more sensitive to parental conflicts than boys. However, this finding was not confirmed by other studies. Research results relating to factor 2 (temperament) are very scarce, in contrast to factor 3 (family characteristics), which was studied extensively leading to the conclusion that children exposed to hostile, aggressive parental conflicts tend to find disagreements to be more threatening and distressing (e.g. Davies & Cummings, 1998). The family's emotional climate (factor 4) has an effect on children's interparental conflict perceptions – an interparental dispute in an otherwise warm and supportive family is perceived by children to be less threatening than a conflict in a family with hostile interactions, because it is not really felt as a danger to family harmony and stability (cf. Fosco & Grych, 2007).

Grych and Fincham (1990) not only offered a framework enabling hypotheses to be formulated concerning the impact of marital conflicts on children but also proposed a measuring tool for assessing marital conflict from the child's perspective. The Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) is a questionnaire comprising three subscales: 1. Conflict properties, 2. Threat, 3. Self-blame, manifesting good psychometric properties (Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992). The CPIC questionnaire made it possible to extend the research scope to better understand the children's perspective, their perception and interpretation of conflict along with adjustment to it. In earlier studies children's exposure to interparental conflict was commonly assessed by parents,

whose estimates about children's awareness concerning their marital conflict were not always credible (Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992).

The seminal work by Grych and Fincham (1990) on how children cognitively and contextually conceptualize their appraisals and their adjustment to interparental conflicts inspired numerous research works by other authors (e.g. Gerard, Buehler, Franck & Anderson, 2005; Knisfogel & Grych, 2004; Fosco & Grych, 2007, 2010; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald, 2000). The research results by Grych and coworkers pointed out the potential importance for cognitive appraisals (Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald, 2000). Findings by other researchers provided further support for appraisals as a mediating role and confirmed that children's beliefs about interparental conflict play a central role as an interpretive filter for their responses to this family stressor (Gerard, Buehler, Franck & Anderson, 2005).

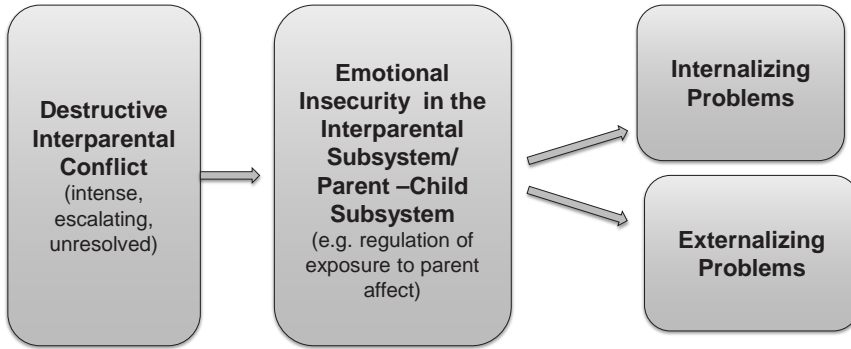
**The Emotional Security Hypothesis.** In this concept elaborated by Davies and Cummings (1994, 1998) the role of child's conflict perception is emphasized, too. Similarly to the attachment security concept (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 2007) emotional security in the marital conflict context is a construct involving children's emotional security about interparental conflict (Cummings, Schemerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006). The Emotional Security Hypothesis postulates that children's emotional security derives from the family systems, in particular from the marital system (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp & Dukewich, 2002). Emotional security is understood as an appraisal that family relationships remain positive and stable even if exposed to usual stressors like marital conflict, and that family members can be expected to remain approachable and emotionally available for the child even in stressful conditions (Cummings, Schemerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006). The Emotional Security Hypothesis conceives children's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to interparental conflict as indications that conflict is comprehended as a threat to marriage stability (Davies & Cummings, 1994; 1998).

The strategies involving children in conflict are linked with increased internalizing symptoms and externalizing problems (see Figure 2). For example, conflicts that endanger children's emotional security are likely to cause enhanced negative emotionality and efforts to control marital conflicts. Constructive conflict is assumed to be connected with non-negative emotionality, in other words, with neutral or even positive emotions, and with no increase in controlling behaviors (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp & Dukewich, 2002). According to Cummings, Schemerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey and Cummings (2006), if children witnessed aggression of one parent against the other they reported negative emotional reactivity and over involvement in the parents' marital dispute. Insecurity is likely to enhance one's propensity for maladaptive responding in new situations



manifested for instance, by lowered flexibility, openness and ability to form and maintain social relationships (cf. Cummings, Schemerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006).

**Figure 2.** *Emotional security as a mediator of relationship between interparental conflict and children's symptomatology (internalizing or externalizing).*



(simplified model extracted from Cummings & Davies, 2002, p. 33)

According to the hypothesis by Davies and Cummings (1994, 1998) children cope with interparental conflict by over-controlling (mediation, comforting, distraction) and by avoiding (distancing, escaping) conflict in trying to preserve emotional security by engaging or disengaging from family stress (Cummings & Davies, 2002; see: Shelton, Harold, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2006). Several recent studies provided support for the clarifying mechanism resulting from the Emotional Security Hypothesis (e.g. Cummings, Davies & Simpson, 1994; Cummings, Schemerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp & Dukewich, 2002).

## **Influence of interparental conflict on children's functioning and adjustment**

Children are usually disturbed when exposed to conflicts in the home. To answer the question why this is happening one should first understand how children cope with interparental conflict. Research studies on this topic conducted since the 1980's made it possible to accumulate consistent evidence indicating that intense marital conflicts have a detrimental effect on children's social and psychological adjustment and their performance at school (Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Cummings, & Davies, 1994; Shelton, Harold, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2006). Theoretical foundations for numerous research works in this field were provided by the two concepts in question,

namely the Emotional Security Hypothesis (Davies & Cummings, 1994; 1998) and the Cognitive-Contextual Framework of Grych and Fincham (1990).

Cross-sectional data and longitudinal studies collected so far give solid evidence supporting the following two main hypotheses: (1) emotional security is an essential contributor to explaining the impact that marital conflicts have on children and their adjustment (cf. Davies, Forman, Rasi, & Stevens, 2002; Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2004), and (2) children's perceptions of threat and self-blame are associated with internalizing behavior problems (Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald, 2000; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). A synthetic account that has selected research results in this field is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Children's responses to interparental conflict (exemplary studies).*

Study	Sample	Results
Gerard, Buehler, Franck & Anderson (2005)	Study I – 1893 adolescents (aged 13–14 years) reported their perceptions of conflict Study II – 2416 married parents reported their conflict and youth maladjustment	Positive correlation between interparental conflict and youth maladjustment. Children's beliefs about interparental conflict were essential in their adjustment to conflict. Perceived threat, self-blame, and coping efficacy were salient mediators of high intensity conflict and triangulation, particularly for internalizing problems.
Fosco & Grych (2007)	144 children (8 to 12 years old) and their parents	Children in families of high levels of negative and low levels of positive emotions showed higher self-blame for conflict; parents' expressiveness did not predict children's threat appraisals.
Cummings, Davies & Simpson (1994)	51 children aged 9–12 years (25 boys and 26 girls) with their mothers	Appraisals of coping efficacy and threat caused by marital conflict were predictors for adjustment problems in boys; self-blame was linked with internalizing problems for girls. Boys' perceptions were better predictors of adjustment outcomes in comparison with mothers' reports.
Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp & Dukewich (2002)	51 couples (trained to complete home diary reports on everyday marital conflicts and children responses)	Parents' negative emotionality and destructive conflict tactics were related to children's insecure emotional and behavioral responses, whereas positive emotionality and constructive conflict tactics were linked with their secure emotional responses.
Sturge-Apple, Cummings & Davies (2006)	210 mothers, fathers, and 6 year old children (3-year period)	Interparental withdrawal had a detrimental impact on children's adjustment, whereas interparental hostility had an indirect effect on subsequent changes in child adjustment.
Sturge-Apple, Davies, Winter, Cummings & Schermerhorn (2008)	229 kindergarten children (127 girls, 102 boys, mean age – 6.0 years) with their parents in 3-year longitudinal investigation	Children's insecure representations of the interparental relationship were a significant intervening mechanism in associations between observational ratings of interparental conflict and child and teacher reports on children's emotional and other difficulties in school over a 2-year period.

Concisely reviewing the relevant results leads to the conclusion that the perceived threat mediates the association between interparental conflict and internalizing problems (e.g. Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald, 2000). Gerard, Buehler, Franck and Anderson (2005) showed a positive correlation between the indicators of interparental conflict



and children's maladjustment. Moreover, some findings confirmed that children's perceptions of interparental conflict are essential for their adjustment to this family stressor. It was also shown that the perceived threat, self-blame, and coping efficacy were salient mediators of overt conflict and triangulation, in particular for internalizing problems. Other authors support in full or in part these outcomes. For example, Ablow, Measelle, Cowan and Cowan (2009) pointed out that children at ages five and six showed a tendency to blame themselves for their parents' conflict, which partially mediated the link between marital conflict and children's internalizing symptoms.

While there is considerable evidence on children's appraisals of interparental conflict and identifying the mechanisms by which marital conflict influences children's internalizing symptoms, little is known with regard to mechanisms affecting the externalizing problems. For example, in Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald (2000) the perceived threat and self-blame were not mediators between interparental conflict and externalizing problems. On the other hand Gerard, Buehler, Franck and Anderson (2005) showed that cognitive appraisals mediate the association between perceptions of interparental conflict by early adolescents (age 13–14) and internalizing and externalizing problems. In addition, it was shown that a direct association exists between triangulation and youth externalizing problems.

According to children's reports in Ablow, Measelle, Cowan and Cowan (2009) young children's (ages 5–6) involvement in interparental conflicts mediated in part the effect of marital conflict on externalizing problems. Similar observations were made by O'Brien, Margolin, John (1995) in 83 families with preadolescent children. It became clear from children's reports that including children in marital conflicts enhanced the child's maladjustment level, whereas keeping them distant from marital conflict reduced their maladjustment. Moreover, in line with the Cognitive-Contextual Framework the significance of context factors such as emotional climate in the family, which can be helpful in understanding how children perceive and assess conflicts between their parents, was pointed out. Fosco and Grych (2007) found that children in families with high level of negative emotions and low level of positive emotions reported higher self-blame for their parents' conflict. On the other hand parental expressiveness did not predict children's threat appraisals.

Several interesting conclusions concerning emotional security in response to interparental conflict were drawn by Cummings and coauthors in a series of papers, namely:

1. The more frequent the marital conflicts, the higher the distress, lack of security and anger in children (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1981)
2. The relation between marital conflict and child security in stable parenting was mediated by the children's emotional security about interparental conflict (Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2006. Emotional security was recog-

nized as an explanatory mechanism for internalizing and externalizing problems in children (Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2006).

3. Children showing higher emotional insecurity when faced with interparental conflict had higher intense internalizing and externalizing problems (Davies & Cummings, 1998; Davies, Forman, Rasi & Stevens, 2002).
4. Negative emotionality and damaging parental conflict tactics were related with insecure emotional and behavioral reactions in children. Reciprocally, constructive conflicts were linked with children's emotional security (Cumminigs, Goeke-Morey, Papp & Dukewich, 2002).

A detrimental impact on interparental withdrawal was found in all child adjustment areas, namely, in internalizing symptoms, externalizing behaviors, and difficulties with scholastic adjustment. Interparental hostility affected changes in child adjustment only indirectly, and was a significantly weaker maladjustment predictor for six-year-old children than interparental withdrawal (Sturge-Apple, Cummings & Davies, 2006).

### **Children's vulnerability to interparental conflicts and gender differences**

Gender differences in children's response to interparental conflicts has attracted many researchers. While both sexes are vulnerable to high intensity conflicts between parents (Grych & Fincham, 1990), girls show more tendency to taking responsibility for marital conflict, which may result in self-blame (Cummings, Vogel, Cummings & El-Sheikh, 1989). Consequently, girls are more prone to developing internalizing (depressing emotions or sadness) rather than externalizing problems (Cummings, Vogel, Cummings & El-Sheikh, 1989; Emery, 1982). The more destructive the marital conflict, the greater the sense among girls in taking responsibility for parents' arguments (Cummings, Vogel, Cummings & El-Sheikh, 1989). The finding for boys was different: with increasing marital conflict intensity, boys showed more anger and aggression, which might reflect their greater threat perception (Cummings et al., 1989). Appraisals of threat were, in turn, likely to increase as marital conflict became more destructive (Cummings, Davies and Simpson, 1994).

### **Content of marital conflict and children's responses**

It has been shown that marital conflicts, which concern children are more upsetting for them than conflicts unrelated to children (e.g. Grych & Fincham, 1993). Furthermore, if conflicts between parents are intense, accompanied with verbal aggression, contain child-related elements, and are not properly resolved, then their impact on children

is particularly negative because it is perceived as emotionally more distressing and threatening (Shelton, Harold, Goeke-Morey, Cummings, 2006). Research results by Grych and Fincham (1993) indicate that verbal aggression and hostility exacerbate children's negative emotions, self-blame and fear that conflict may escalate and pull them in. Conflicts whose content was child-related induced in children a stronger feeling of shame, self-blame and conviction that the child could help find a solution to the marital conflict. Intense conflicts may pose a threat to children's sense of safety and raise various fears, for example, divorce. Child-related conflicts can end up with self-derogating cognitions and more active children's engagement in their parents' arguments. Interestingly, younger children may blame themselves more easily for their parents' conflicts (Fincham, Grych & Osborne, 1994).

If marital conflict is related to the child it raises shame and self-blame in children and stimulates them to intervening in their parents' conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1993). Shelton, Harold, Goeke-Morey and Cummings (2006) found that children are prone to interfere in a conflict for which they feel responsible. Conflict intensity and potential physical risk and psychological hurt are for them much less important. In contrast conflicts not related to children that are less hostile and resolved constructively are less stressful for them even if they occur relatively often (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, Grych & Osborne, 1994). Children seem to be less affected by conflicts when parents tell them that the marital conflict has been resolved (Cummings, Simpson & Wilson, 1993).

## **How children cope with marital conflict**

Children cope with marital conflicts, especially conflicts accompanied with interparental anger, in different ways (cf. O'Brien, Margolin & John, 1995; Shelton, Harold, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2006). Generally, they tend to intervene in marital conflicts trying to find solutions or relief for their parents. Children's strategies when faced with marital conflict may be active (involving mediation) or passive (by withdrawal or avoidance). According to Shelton, Harold, Goeke-Morey and Cummings (2006) on sampling 398 children (208 boys and 190 girls) aged 12–13 years, children would rather mediate conflicts initiated by fathers than mothers. An interesting observation from the same study is that children's strategies based on conflict avoidance did not prove to be uniformly protective. Frequently used conflict avoidance strategy may prevent children from reaching for more effective strategies to cope with interparental conflict.

An analysis of available research shows that high intensity conflict and verbal anger between parents generates negative feelings in children, accompanied with enhanced fear, irritation and sadness. This is quite upsetting for children because it may put at risk

family relations. Less intense marital conflicts with concealed mutual hostility were also upsetting for children, because “nonverbal anger and the use of silent treatment” causes fear in children that conflict may not get resolved. Also, when a parent withdraws from a marital relationship it represents a major distress to the child, who may thereby experience adjustment problems (for reviews see: Shelton, Harold, Goeke-Morey and Cummings, 2006).

### **Marital conflict and parent-child relationship**

Repeated marital conflicts, if not resolved constructively, are likely not only to negatively affect children’s functioning in the family and their adjustment, but may also risk impairing the parent-child relationship. To this end three main parent-child categories can be distinguished (Snyder, 1998). The first category is concerned with inconsistencies in discipline. Parents in conflict employ less effective corrective strategies towards their children’s and monitor their behavior with reduced attention. The second is concerned with a marital conflict’s “spillover” effect on the parent-child relationship with potentially disruptive consequences (e.g. increased aggression toward the child). The third category is connected with emotional links between the parent and child. If marital conflicts occur often they result in parents’ emotional exhaustion and reduce their capability to identify and react to children’s emotional needs. This in turn may be perceived by children as rejection and cause various deteriorating effects in their adjustment and development (Fincham, Grych & Osborne, 1994; see for review Snyder, 1998).

### **Methodological problems: parents’ versus children’s reports about marital discord**

Research studies using data from parents’ and children’s reports started relatively early because it had soon been recognized that parents might underestimate children’s awareness of marital conflicts or children might concentrate on different facets of marital conflicts than parents (Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992). According to observations by Emery and Leary (1982) children’s assessments of interparental conflicts may more adequately predict those conflicts than their parents’ reports do. Further studies have confirmed these hypotheses. Cummings, Davis and Simpson (1994) found that in 51 children aged 9–12 years from intact families, boys’ perceptions of marital conflict were more accurate predictors of children’s adjustment than reports by their mothers. Similar conclusions were formulated by Davern, Steiger and Luk (2005) in their study of 14–16 years old. Here, adolescent psychological adjustment was a better predictor than those

by their parents. Such studies emphasize the importance of child and adolescent perceptions concerning interparental conflict, and that it is necessary to collect data from both sources, that is, from children and parents alike.

## **Parent education programs as protective interventions for children**

As research on the effect of marital conflicts on children adjustment and disruption in parent-child relation pattern has progressed, practitioners followed by researchers have focused on devising parental educational programs and monitoring their efficiency. Among marital intervention programs, inspired by the theoretical guidelines and based on empirical research results, those proposed by Faircloth and Cummings (2008; see also Faircloth, Schemerhorn, Mitchell, Cummings & Cummings, 2011) known as “Optimal marital intervention-programs” are worth mentioning. These programs comprise the following elements: a) education about empirically-based information for expressing and negotiating marital conflict for the sake of children, (b) practical skills training aimed at transforming destructive arguments into constructive discussions. An underlying assumption is that parental education about conflict consequences and a more effective approach to its resolution will lead to increase in constructive marital conflicts, decreases in destructive marital conflicts, and to positive changes in other family functions placing them in longer perspective due to well-established interrelations between marital conflict, parenting and child adjustment (Faircloth & Cummings, 2008; Faircloth, Schemerhorn, Mitchell, Cummings & Cummings, 2011). In particular, it was expected that improvements in marital conflict were interrelated with improvements in parenting and child issues. The parents were not confronted with the question whether they had a conflict but rather how they were going to deal with it. It was a way to understand that differentiation between constructive and destructive behaviors in marital conflicts have an essential impact on the well-being of spouses and children (Sturge-Apple, Cummings & Davies, 2006; see also Faircloth, Schemerhorn, Mitchell, Cummings & Cummings, 2011).

Faircloth and Cummings (2008) investigated effectiveness of an educational program for preventing negative marital conflicts. Their analyses showed that the program had a positive impact on parents’ understanding their marital conflicts at different assessment times. Less interparental anger in the presence of children was reported at six months, while better conflict tactics and parenting care was reported after six months and 12 months. These outcomes are encouraging for further research and expansion on conflict tactics.

Long term effectiveness of a prevention program for improving marital conflict was investigated by Faircloth, Schemerhorn, Mitchell, Cummings and Cummings (2011) on couples with children aged between four and eight years with a follow up after 24

months. The outcome confirmed the long-term effectiveness of short-term psychoeducational programs for parents focused on marital conflicts and family processes. Two years following program completion, the participants had a greater awareness of their marital conflicts influence on the family and manifested improved behavior in constructive conflict resolution. These changes were associated with positive changes in marital satisfaction, parenting, and child adjustment. It is worth stressing that this psychoeducational program was based on theoretical models resulting from the emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994) and the attachment theory (Faircloth, Schemerhorn, Mitchell, Cummings, & Cummings, 2011), where developing and maintaining strong emotional bonds during marital conflict were emphasized.

## **Summary and conclusions**

While interparental disagreements usually occur in family life, if not constructively resolved they may create marital distress affecting not only couple's satisfaction but also children's security and their psychological and social functioning. Research findings reviewed in this paper show that children are very sensitive to interparental conflicts. Involving them in such conflicts may increase the risk of child maladjustment, especially in aggressive child-related conflicts that are not constructively resolved. Children use different coping strategies, such as mediation, comforting, distraction and avoidance (distancing, escape).

The aim of this paper was to gain a better understanding about the effects of marital conflict on children through comprehensively analysing existing research results. To this end two main theoretical models of mechanisms linking marital conflict to child adjustment were presented: the Cognitive-Contextual Framework of Grych and Fincham (1990) and Emotional Security Hypothesis of Davies and Cummings (1994) which builds on the attachment theory.

This analysis has shown that marital conflicts are associated with numerous adjustment difficulties in children, including problems with cognition, emotional responses, behavioral responses, and physiological responses. Children's emotional reactions and behavior during marital conflicts may be positive, neutral or negative, depending on parental conflict resolution patterns. Children's reactions to interparental conflict are mediated or moderated by various variables such as children's emotional security, feeling at fault for their parents' conflict, and feeling threatened by parental relationship arguments. In addition some contextual factors such as family characteristics, the family's emotional climate, and children's gender and their temperament may have an impact on children's emotional reactions and behavior in interparental conflicts. They interpret and respond to their par-



ents' conflicts and try to cope with them, although many of the children's conflict coping strategies are far from being adaptive due to their high emotional-cognitive costs (e.g. internalizing problems such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem).

It has been shown that parental destructive – both verbal and non-verbal – conflict behaviors are associated with children's behavioral problems. In contrast, the parents' positive emotionality and their efforts in conflict resolution and constructiveness are classified as constructive conflict behaviors leading to children's positive or neutral reactions.

A legitimate question arises concerning what parents can do to ameliorate the impact of their conflicts on children? A positive answer to this question is offered by educational programs for preventing the negative effects of marital conflicts as shown by the follow-up studies discussed in the preceding section. Our review of theoretical models and research results may be both informative and inspirational for undertaking new research projects on this relationship as many mechanisms remain unexplored. Finally, one could think of new psychoeducational programs for parents regarding marital conflict impacts on children, and the large parental potential for improved conflict management. For high-conflict couples in separation or divorce, family mediation could be considered as a protective factor for children in facilitating their adjustment (cf. Przybyła-Basista, 2015).

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